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Using social media to engage nurses in health policy development

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Aims: To explore nurses' views on future priorities for the profession and to examine social media as an engagement tool to aid policy discussion and development.

Background: Nurses are often not directly involved in policy creation and some feel it is a process they cannot easily influence.

Methods: A descriptive mixed methods study of a Twitter chat hosted by the Chief Nursing Officer for Scotland was undertaken. Data were gathered using an analytics platform and NCapture software. The framework approach aided thematic analysis to draw out themes.

Results: Sixty-four people took part in the Twitter chat (#CNOScot) and posted 444 tweets. Nurses called for investment in technology, nursing research, education and mental health. Primary care and advanced practice roles to support older adults with complex health and social care needs were also seen as vital to develop further.

Conclusion: Social media can help reach and engage nurses in policy discussion and ensure there is better continuity between policy and practice but some groups risk being excluded using this digital medium.

Implications for Nursing Management: Nursing leaders should consider social media as one of many engagement strategies to ensure nurses and other stakeholders participate in policy debate that informs health strategy development.

KEYWORDS

engagement, leadership, nursing, policy, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

The future of nursing is always a hotly debated topic as the profession continues to advance and diversify in different ways. Global trends such as ageing populations, rising numbers of people with chronic disease, economic slowdown, environmental challenges and information technology (IT) are some of the drivers that are changing the face of nursing going forward (IOM, 2011). Leaders in government and national health services are continuously adapting to this shifting landscape, devising and implementing policies to deliver public services that meet the needs of society. However, health policy can often be designed with little input from frontline nursing staff, whose clinical, educational and research expertise could add value to its scope and

direction (Gebbie, Wakefield, & Kerfoot, 2000; Shariff, 2014). It has been noted that few practising nurses engage in policy debate, as they do not see it as a key issue to become involved in or a process they can easily influence (Mason, Gardner, Hopkins Outlaw, & O'Grady, 2015; Toofany, 2005).

A number of factors can encourage and support nurses to actively participate in the design and creation of health policy such as having positive role models, personal connections, undertaking research or further education, or gaining direct experience in strategy development (Gimbel, Kohler, Mitchell, & Emami, 2017; Spenceley, Reutter, & Allen, 2006). Information technology has been noted as another potential avenue to encourage nurses to participate in policy design, by enabling them to network and communicate with senior leaders and legislators

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(Taylor, 2016). DiChiacchio (2014) developed a website that was used by advanced practice nurses and students to communicate information to policy makers about the importance and value of their role. The findings from this study suggest that digital platforms could help to improve the involvement of nurses in the policy making process. However, very little primary research exists on the use of technology, in particular social media, to engage nurses in health policy debate and development.

2 | BACKGROUND

Nursing leaders are primarily focused on developing the professional knowledge and skills of the workforce to improve practice and patient outcomes, by setting priorities and implementing policies that help shape the future direction of nursing (Antrobus & Kitson, 1999; Disch, Dreher, Davidson, Sinioris, & Wainio, 2011). In response to a new national strategy called "2020Vision" to achieve high quality health care in Scotland, the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) published plans to ensure the nursing profession could meet this new agenda (Scottish Government, 2014). These outline how to improve upon and expand the capacity of the nursing workforce in the coming years, to support the integration of health and social care, promote preventative health and person-centred care, and deliver services in the home or community where possible to enable patient self-management. In addition, a new national strategy called "2030 Vision for Nursing" is under development and the CNO is utilizing a range of engagement strategies to ensure nurses at all levels can participate in this process.

One avenue being used by the national health directorate to convey and exchange information with nurses throughout Scotland is social media, which now forms part of the CNO's communications strategy. Social media is a relatively new technological phenomenon that enables users to create personalized profiles and build open virtual communities where people can interact with each other and develop and share content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These online applications are being used in nursing to disseminate health information, communicate with patients and educate nurses among others (O'Connor et al., 2017; Skiba, 2008). The CNO organised a national Twitter chat to encourage nurses and other stakeholders to contribute ideas to and shape the refreshed strategy for nursing in Scotland that is currently under development. Therefore, the aim of this study is twofold; first to explore the views of those who participated in this Twitter chat to understand their opinions on the future direction of the nursing profession in Scotland, and second to examine social media as a digital tool to engage nurses in policy discussion and development. This will help address the dearth of literature on this topic and inform nursing leaders internationally about how online technologies, such as social media, can be leveraged to enable nurses to actively participate in policy formation.

3 | METHODS

This study adopted a mixed approach, assuming a qualitative inquiry grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to explore the perspectives of

nurses on the future development of the profession and quantitative methods were applied to examine the utility of social media to engage nurses in policy debate.

3.1 | Participants

Email invitations for the social media discussion were sent to all National Health Service (NHS) regional boards and higher education institutes as well as numerous related voluntary and government agencies associated with providing nursing and health services in Scotland. These informed the various organisations of the aims of the Twitter chat and how people could participate. The emails were further distributed to staff within these institutions and announcements were also posted online via several social media platforms. There were no inclusion or exclusion criteria and anyone was welcome to take part.

3.2 | Setting

Twitter was chosen as the social media setting for this discussion as it is a completely open online forum that anyone is free to use. In addition, any Twitter account can be followed and any content comment upon, retweeted or shared. The hashtag feature of Twitter is particularly useful as it can be used as a keyword to search, find and track of all the conversations on the topic as they happen in real-time. The hour long Twitter chat was conducted on 24 May 2016 under the hashtag #CNOScot. Four questions were posed and responded to by the CNO and her team during the online discussion to generate debate and crowdsource answers from a range of participants to help inform future nursing policy.

3.3 | Ethical considerations

As Twitter is an online public platform all data that users post, with the exception of private messages, is freely available and therefore formal ethical approval was not required for this study, as it consisted of secondary analysis of non-sensitive data already in the public domain. In order to protect the privacy of those who participated in the Twitter chat, any identifying information contained in the tweets (e.g. usernames, locations, organisations) were replaced with pseudonyms following best practice guidelines (Chretien & Kind, 2013; NCSBN 2011).

3.4 | Data collection

Twitter data were collected from the virtual focus group posthumously using the hashtag #CNOScot. The NCapture application on NVivo QSR 10.0 was used to extract the sample of tweets posted online. A manual assessment of the Twitter chat was also undertaken to verify the dataset. An online tool called Keyhole (<http://keyhole.co/>) was employed to gather analytics data.

3.5 | Data analysis

The framework approach was used to explore and understand the qualitative data and draw out ideas related to future priorities for nursing

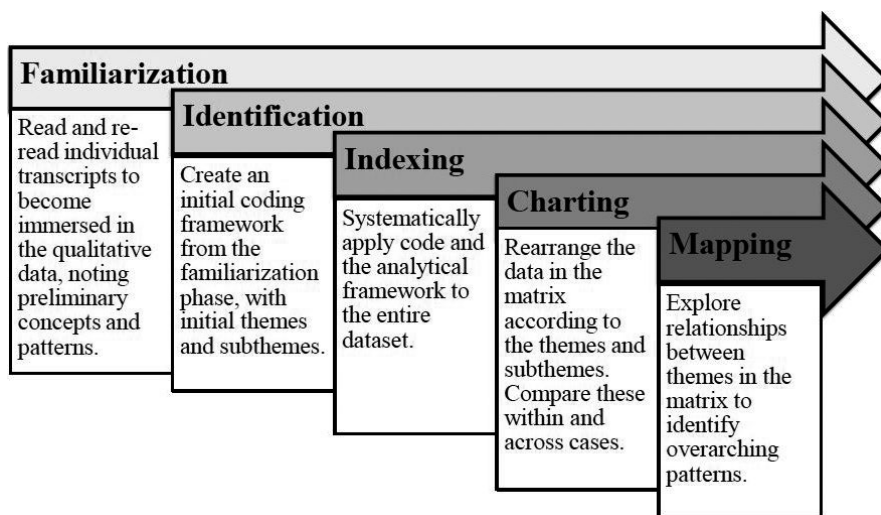


FIGURE 1 Steps in the framework approach

(Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). The five step analytical process outlined in Figure 1 was followed to organise data into key concepts and overarching themes. Codes and categories were developed in NVivo by considering each tweet, hashtag and Twitter handle used to summarize what the participants were debating. From this a coding matrix was generated that was applied rigorously to the entire dataset. This process enabled changes to be tracked and progress to be recorded over time in a structured way. Data were synthesised by refining the initial themes and categories until the “whole picture” of where future nursing policy should focus emerged, whilst remaining grounded in participants’ rich descriptions of issues in practice. A third party application called Keyhole was used to generate analytics on the #CNOScot hashtag. This provides a simple visual dashboard of metrics and descriptive statistics such as the number of tweets, number of users, the reach and impression of the hashtag, top posts, related topics in keywords and hashtags as well as demographics and location of participants among others. This dataset was used to help gauge the level of engagement in the Twitter chat.

3.6 | Rigour

The trustworthiness of the study encompassed the four main dimensions of qualitative rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Noble & Smith, 2015). Credibility in the findings were enhanced through the use of robust methods of data collection and analysis, the random sample of participants, examination of negative data and use of peer debriefing. Dependability was established by holding a coding clinic with a research colleague who checked samples of the analysis. Transferability can be seen in the rich descriptions of participants’ perspectives on the future of the nursing profession that were created and the depiction of the health landscape in Scotland. Finally, confirmability was addressed by triangulating data from numerous different types of participants in the Twitter chat.

4 | RESULTS

The Twitter chat generated discussion and debate on what nursing in Scotland needs to focus on for the future, which encompassed five

themes: (1) Technology and Informatics, (2) Research, (3) Education, (4) Mental Health and (5) Advanced Practice.

4.1 | Technology and informatics

Technology was seen as an area to invest in and several suggestions were made about how to develop this field in nursing. One conversation mentioned developing the informatics competence of the nursing workforce and the need to educate both students and practising professionals in this area. Another aspect was how nurses could leverage technology to reduce the geographical distances they faced between each other and their patients. Some thought that technology such as telehealth could be utilized for this purpose to deliver better care. However, participants highlighted the barrier that poor telecommunication networks in some areas caused, as slow or non-existent Internet access limited working in a mobile way. They wanted to see more capital spending to overcome this problem and equip nurses with modern mobile devices and other technologies (Table 1).

4.2 | Research

Research was also discussed as certain participants felt it must become fundamental to the profession and be directly relevant to clinical practice to bring about improvements in patient care. Some thought nurses focused too much on clinical audits and felt the culture of the NHS needed to adapt and support evidence based practice. Additional approaches to building the capacity of nursing researchers and clinical academics were mentioned such as stronger links with higher education and specialist nursing research centres.

4.3 | Education

Participants felt high quality education would continue to be critical to enhancing the nursing profession long-term. A focus on preparing the workforce to care for patients at home and in other community

TABLE 1 Participant tweets related to key themes

Theme	Participant tweets
Technology and informatics	<p>'Agree re IT skills – we need to be intentional around development rather than assume' (Participant 7)</p> <p>'currently working with DN colleagues telehealth project & supporting them with their new clinical skills' (Participant 56)</p> <p>'IT and kit important but it's an enabler for nurses to deliver skills in caring' (Participant 41)</p> <p>'we have to put effective mobile IT at the centre of our vision' (Participant 47)</p>
Research	<p>'#research with direct clinical impact and in workplace #education way to get the step-change we need' (Participant 12)</p> <p>'It is in pre reg & then not used post reg. The culture is about audit & not research' (Participant 49)</p> <p>'yes but #nurses in practice need more #research support to improve #patient outcomes #academia can help!' (Participant 48)</p>
Education	<p>'Need to consider educational preparation & support for nurses & midwives working in remote & rural settings as part of visioning' (Participant 46)</p> <p>'We must look to see how to tear down the hospital walls and have students in community as the norm – yes key' (Participant 7)</p> <p>'sounds good to connect remote and rural/urban communities #CNOScot use for learning and practice?' (Participant 40)</p>
Mental health	<p>'Need to blend aspects of general and mental health nursing and remove silos to ensure relationship based care' (Participant 41)</p> <p>'Mental health must get bigger in nurse education. #CNOScot ? Future @nmcnews standards? #Scotland to lead!' (Participant 11)</p> <p>'pilot of H/V and CMHN already happening in [x area]' (Participant 37)</p> <p>'Mental health nurse training should have people w/ 'lived experience' at heart of programme inc critical voices' (Participant 65)</p>
Advanced practice	<p>'Looking @ roles blending AP skills in 'primary care' & 'older people's care' essential to support future community care' (Participant 46)</p> <p>'I think further development in MH might be a priority and specialist dementia care too?' (Participant 3)</p> <p>'lots of great leaders in GP nursing needing space and support to ensure their voices heard' (Participant 41)</p>

settings was evident and one person suggested nursing students undertaking more clinical placements in primary care to prepare them for future practice. For practising nurses it was felt that the challenges of reaching patients in remote parts of the country were being met, but best practice could be shared better between different areas.

4.4 | Mental health

Mental health was another area discussed as being necessary to develop for the future nursing workforce. Participants suggested additional training for mental health and generalist nurses to ensure they considered both physical and psychological aspects of care, to bridge the disciplinary divide and better support patients' needs. A few mentioned community mental health nurses who were being piloted in health visiting roles to enhance family centred care, as a positive initiative that could be rolled out nationwide. One person suggested involving people with mental health problems in education programmes to ensure that the patient voice is heard and understood.

4.5 | Advanced practice

The need for more advanced practice clinicians in the community was also debated as people felt older adults needed more specialist support at home to address the health and social care challenges of ageing, with dementia being mentioned as one example. This included palliative and end of life care, mental health as well as nurses skilled in dealing with frailty. The subject of nursing leadership was also brought up as some felt more senior role models in nursing could help bring about safe and effective changes in community care.

4.6 | Engaging nurses via social media

Engagement via social media can be viewed as the creation of connections between an individual or organisation and its audience members or followers, which contributes to a common goal or benefit. The level of engagement can range from low to medium or high and standards for measuring these on Twitter have been developed (Neiger, Thackeray, Burton, Giraud-Carrier, & Fagen, 2012). The #CNOScot

TABLE 2 Number and type of participants in the #CNOScot Twitter chat

Type of participant	No
No description given	9
Nurse (non-specific)	8
Nursing Director	7
Nurse Lecturer	5
Mental Health Nurse	4
Researcher	4
Professional Association	3
Higher Education Institute	3
Associate CNO	2
Carer	2
Nurse Consultant	2
AHP Senior Manager	1
Chief Medical Officer	1
Chief Nursing Officer	1
Community Nurse	1
Director of a Consultancy Company	1
Health Improvement Advisor	1
Journalist	1
Learning Disability Nurse	1
Nurse Team Leader	1
Nurse Manager	1
Patient Safety Improvement Advisor	1
Practice Nurse	1
Social Work Officer	1
Theatre Nurse	1
Writer	1
Total	64

TABLE 3 Top ten hashtags used during the #CNOScot chat

No	Hashtag (#)	Frequency
1	#CNOScot	446
2	#mhimprove	5
3	#nurses	4
4	#research	3
5	#education	3
6	#eolc	2
7	#IT	2
8	#NAHSCP	2
9	#nursing	2
10	#technology	2

chat would be considered as medium level engagement, due to the dialogic nature of the interactions. Sixty-four people took part in the hour-long online discussion, posting 444 tweets in total. The reach of the chat was 9095, the maximum size of the unique Twitter audience,

and it generated 43553 impressions, the number of times users saw the tweets on the platform (Ganis & Kohirkar, 2015). Based on information in individual Twitter handles, the participants were from various nursing and non-nursing backgrounds as can be seen in Table 2. The majority of participants were female ($n = 43$), several were male ($n = 16$) and the remaining six participants were organisations or institutions associated with nursing and health care and so were gender neutral. Most were based in Scotland but several people did not describe who they were or where they were located based in their Twitter handle. The top hashtags used during the Twitter chat can be seen in Table 3 and the most commonly used words are outlined in Figure 2, which mirror to some extent the main themes that emerged from the online discussion.

5 | DISCUSSION

The Twitter chat generated much debate and discussion about where the future focus of nursing in Scotland should lie. Technology was highlighted as necessary to deliver health services as it can provide efficiencies in supporting large numbers of patients and professionals in managing health and social care needs. This trend can be seen internationally as many countries are adopting electronic health records and other digital tools to improve their health system (WHO, 2016). Although telehealth and mobile health were mentioned, other specialist areas such as wearable devices, robotics, or Big Data, where large, diverse datasets are analysed using sophisticated software techniques to reveal new trends and patterns (Brennan & Bakken, 2015), were not brought up. Further research to explore what additional technologies are needed to support nurses and patients would be useful to ensure these are incorporated into national policies on workforce development and service delivery. Education on technology enabled care is also key and a review of nursing and midwifery education by the CNO in 2014 specified the inclusion of health informatics in pre-registration curricula (Scottish Government, 2014) which has not been uniformly adopted. Research exploring what pedagogical model of health informatics education would best suit nursing staff and students would be helpful and could be combined with international best practices on developing informatics competence as advocated by the Technology Informatics Guiding Education Reform (TIGER) Initiative (Hubner et al., 2016). It is likely the current impetus to educate nurses about technology will translate into future education standards and training programmes not only in Scotland but also worldwide.

Research and education were two areas identified as having a positive impact on nursing and the care of patients. Although the emphasis was to link these directly to clinical practice, literature shows many nurses do not value research and its application to the real-world (Brown, Wickline, Ecoff, & Glaser, 2009) and barriers exist which prevent the translation of Evidence Based Practice (EBP) (Mashiach Eizenberg, 2011). Although current nursing education standards include EBP, many in the workforce still lack an understanding of this area, which is a problem common to many countries that prevents

and platforms vary in their definition and use, so they can be misleading. For example, the term “impression” is used to refer to tweets that have been delivered to a Twitter stream but not everyone who receives a tweet actually reads it. This figure also excludes social media data streamed to third party applications like Hootsuite, so whether it is a useful measurement or not is debatable, as it only reflects the size of your potential audience. Other engagement metrics such as retweets and replies are more accurate. However bots, which are automated software or algorithms posing in social media networks as real users, are problematic as they can inflate various engagement metrics by liking posts, following users and tweeting misinformation among others (Ruths & Pfeffer, 2014). Like any statistics, social media analytics must be interpreted within the context in which they are generated as they cannot fully predict or explain social behaviour and can be manipulated (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). More nursing research is needed to fully understand the advantages and disadvantages of social media analytics, to help educate everyone in the profession and to ensure nurses appreciate its benefits and drawbacks in interpreting online environments and virtual behaviours.

6 | LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to the secondary analysis of data in the public domain, which was generated over a short time period so it does not allow for generalisation. It was also not possible to verify with absolute certainty who the participants were, as information in personal Twitter handles is self-reported. The sample size was small and certain participants were more active than others which could have introduced bias.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING MANAGEMENT

Nursing leaders may benefit from including social media in their engagement strategies and should consider the following when planning this type of activity. Social media policies that exist within health organisations or have been issued by professional associations may be useful to incorporate, where appropriate, into an engagement approach. For example, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing published a white paper on how nurses can use social media (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2011), which provides useful guidance on maximizing the benefits and limiting the risks of this type of online interaction. Additional expertise in running social media campaigns and tracking analytics may be necessary to support the design, delivery and evaluation of this type of communication, as it is a niche area that requires some specialist support (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008). Detailed plans of the social media engagement activity should drawn up and include: deciding what the ultimate goal or objective is; considering the audience that needs to be attracted and how best to recruit them; identifying what social media platforms to use; determining the hashtag and branding that are appropriate for the topic; agreeing how the online discussion will

be facilitated and run; selecting the analytics application and metrics to use and how the results of the online engagement will be evaluated and shared with relevant stakeholders (Tuten & Solomon, 2016). By taking these steps nurse managers and leaders can ensure their social media strategy is implemented correctly to achieve more engagement from nurses that can better inform health policy.

8 | CONCLUSION

Social media is gaining in popularity as a communications tool to reach and engage nurses on many topics. Nursing leaders could capitalize on the benefits that this digital channel creates to generate important discussion and undertake horizon scanning to identify future priorities for the profession. This could better inform health policy development and ensure high-quality patient care is delivered long term.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceptualized and designed the study, undertook the data collection and analysis, and drafted and wrote the manuscript.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was not required for this study due to the social media platform being an online open forum, which is in line with current best practice guidelines.

ABBREVIATIONS

Some abbreviations were used in the Twitter chat by participants and are included in the quotations used in this paper. Potential explanations for them are given here, although they may not be wholly accurate: Advanced Practice (AP), Community Mental Health Nurse (CMHN), District Nurse (DN), General Practitioner (GP), Health Visitor (H/V) and Mental Health (MH).

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